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A Professional Mindset

Simon Hartley stresses how important preparation is in sport and illustrates his point with examples from golf and football

professional and who was the young player. There were some tell-tale signs that gave them away.

Before they competed, I watched the two players practising on the putting green. One player would take his ball, pick a hole and do his best to sink the

putt. He did this 20-30 times, focusing as hard as he could on each shot. The other player took out four balls and a tee. He placed the tee in the ground and placed his four balls about six to seven feet from it. He then practised by aiming to putt each ball so that it just touched the tee. It is a drill that requires a great deal of precision. Our first player's practice lasted around 20 minutes. Of the 20-30 attempts, he made two or three successful putts (i.e. they went in the hole first time). The second player's practice lasted around 45 minutes, although he took fewer shots. During this time he ensured that each of his attempts finished within a few centimetres of the

target. Around 20 percent of the shots did indeed end with the ball just touching the tee.

During their competitive nine holes the players were very evenly matched in most areas. Often their balls

“The players were very evenly matched”

would land on the green in the same

number of shots and within a few feet of each other. Sometimes the younger player would be slightly closer to the hole and vice versa. Logically, you'd expect that they might half the hole. However, it was at this point that the difference between the two players was

illustrated most starkly. You might expect that the

experienced professional would need less time to read the green and that he would need fewer practice swings before taking his shot. In reality, though, he took much longer. Instead of just assessing the green from one or two different angles, he would look at it

from three or four different angles. If the shot was a six-foot putt, he would assess it from three feet, as well as six. The aspiring young player would take three or four practice swings and then hit his shot, whereas the experienced player would take eight or nine practice swings before hitting his shot. The end result was tiny, but, at the same time, it was huge. On more than one occasion the inexperienced player would miss the putt by just an inch or two and be forced to take another shot. Inevitably, the experienced player sank it first time and, in reality, he was perhaps six to eight inches more

“The game plan was well-researched”

accurate on the putting green during the entire nine holes.

However, the scorecard showed that the experienced player was three shots better over nine holes, which equates to six shots per round. That is the difference between an experienced player who earns millions on Tour and an aspirational young player.

What does it highlight? That the better players are often no more talented than their opponents. However, the very best players always seem to be just a point or two better. As we know, the margins between winning and losing can be minute. In Olympic sports, sometimes the difference can be hundredths of a second. So why is it that one athlete is consistently quicker by a hundredth of a second, whilst the others always end up second by that tiny margin? Perhaps it comes down to preparation?

Sport psychology researcher David Horrocks has studied the way in which world-class athletes prepare.

I watched two golfers playing nine competitive holes last week. One was an experienced European Tour player whose career earnings extend into the millions. The other was an aspirational, up-and-coming, young player who has got plenty of potential. As a sport psychologist, I found it fascinating to watch them at work. Without ever seeing the ball, it was possible to tell which player was the experienced Tour





Gary Neville, the former England defender who is now a Sky Sports pundit

He spent time studying football players, such as Gary Neville, who won multiple domestic and European trophies with Manchester United and was capped many times by England. Neville would spend many hours each day, outside of training, watching video footage of the opposition and mentally preparing for the next game. He would study the opposing

team, not just the player he would face directly. This would enable Neville to understand how the ball reached his opposite number, who passed to him, what type of passes were used, which passes opposing players could make comfortably and which they tended not to make. All of

“The technology is readily available”

this information was used to form Neville’s game plan. The game plan was well-researched, well-rehearsed and gave him a great chance of ensuring it was well-executed.

Interestingly, many people remark that truly elite sports players are often ‘in the right place at the right time’. If, through studying footage, you understand where the ball tends to land, it is more likely that you’ll be in ‘the right place at the right time’. Many of those things that are often attributed to ‘luck’, may in fact be the result of planning and preparation.

Having a professional mindset doesn’t necessarily mean that you need to have huge amounts of time or massive resources at your disposal. You can develop a more professional mindset simply by increasing the amount of thought and application you dedicate to practice and preparation.

Most players have got access to some form of performance analysis, even if that is simply a coach or friend filming you with a camcorder or smart phone whilst you play. The technology is readily available. However, what we do with it is crucial. That is what normally separates the very best athletes from the rest.

TOP TIPS:

- 1. Take some time out to review the quality of your practice. How purposeful is it?**
- 2. Review your preparation. What little things could you do better?**
- 3. Challenge yourself to keep increasing the quality of your preparation and practice.**

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